Article

Fans, Fellows or Followers: A Study on How Sport Federations Shape Social Media Affordances

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Abstract: Increased in-depth knowledge on how sport federations shape their social media affordances to build relationships with their audiences will develop the understanding and ongoing discussion on the effects of social media in organized sports. The aim of this study was therefore to investigate in what way sports federations shape their social media affordances to create an increased understanding of how they interact with their audiences through social media. Three sports federations, the Swedish Basketball Federation, the Swedish Skateboard Association, and the Swedish Equestrian Federation, were investigated through semi-structured interviews as well as digital ethnography. The analytical focus lies on in what way the organizations shape social media affordances as well as in what way they imagine social media uses and users. This study shows that the federations’ imagination of who their users are, what they would like to see and how these users act and react defines their affordances. Further, the results reveal that the federations have differing approaches to in what way they imagine their users (as fans, fellows or followers) as well as what their incentives are for using social media. To learn how ongoing mediations mold long-term changes for sport federations, it is of importance to look beyond mediatization and learn more about their current structure and operations, their history, and traditions, as well as their view of their users.

Keywords: sport federations; social media; affordances; imagined affordances; audiences; basketball; skateboard; equestrian sports; mediatization

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Aim

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and, more specifically, Social Network Sites (SNS) have made an impact on the society of sports. Ever since the early years of social media, researchers have studied the cultural, social, commercial, economic, and technological impact on sports through the lenses of social media (cf. Billings et al. 2019; Filo et al. 2015; Geurin 2017). According to the 2022 edition of the International Sports Federations (IFs) Social Media Ranking, aiming to capture the social media footprint of IFs, the federations generally show a consistent growth in terms of social media numbers. The federation with the highest number of followers is the international Cricket Council, with over 92 million followers, followed by FIFA (51 million followers) and the International Basketball Federation (15 million followers). Even if the development and importance of social media use among sports federations is evident, the latest report published on the Swedish sports confederations’ website, focusing on social media in relation to the development of the sport movement, dates back to 2012. The report emphasizes the possibilities and challenges of using SNS and concludes that the use of social media can support the sports movement to build networks and relations with audiences, and through this, enhance its position in society (cf. Westelius et al. 2012). The probability that social media use looks the same way among sports organizations today as it did back in 2012 is slim, and research on national sports federations’ utilization of social media is scarce.
The aim of this study was therefore to investigate in what way national sports federations shape their social media affordances to interact with their audiences through social media to develop the understanding on organizational mediatization among national sport federations.

In a study on Danish national sports federations’ use of SNS, Frandsen (2016) shows that digital media are a major concern among federations but that the response towards this influence differs across organizations. For some federations, the operation of digital media is centralized, while others outsource communication tasks, and for many federations, it is difficult to navigate in what way they can best utilize opportunities brought to them through digital media. One of the significant effects of digital media is, according to Frandsen, “a dispersion of communication involving more people and concurrent increasing internal complexity in many organizations” (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). It is important to include a wider range of sports and organizations that traditionally have been excluded from the mass media over the years to extend the knowledge about the effect of digital media (Frandsen 2016); this as marginalized sports are under pressure to adapt to the perceived media logic, by communicating with their audiences through social media to increase their media presence (Nölleke and Birkner 2019). Following the advice from previous research, the three sports federations studied in this article are the Swedish Basketball Federation, the Swedish Skateboard Association, and the Swedish Equestrian Federation. All of these are sports that to some levels have been marginalized (Andersson 2003; Oczki and Pleskot 2020) from the mass media in Sweden.

The mediatization of sports has been developing over the past two decades, and it has led to an increased presence of sports organizations on digital platforms (English 2022; Schallhorn et al. 2022; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; Frandsen 2016). Research shows that this is moving the boundaries of sports media and sports journalism, resulting in strong divisions between the coverage produced by the sports organizations themselves, i.e., PR in the shape of in-house publications mainly published online, and the coverage produced by journalists (Frandsen 2016; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; English 2022). Previously, sports organizations relied on news publications and journalists to reach out with news and reports to their audiences. Now, these organizations are scaling up their own communication departments, and at the same time, a decline in sports journalism’s traditional capabilities is seen (English 2021). However, not all sports have a history of receiving high media coverage in traditional media, and not all sports organizations have the resources to upscale their communications departments. Even if there is a new wave of mediatization taking place in sports, there are still differences regarding the levels and effects of mediatization in different organizations (Frandsen 2016).

To further investigate the effects of digital media on sports organizations, this study focused on federations’ aims and strategies of using SNS. The results are interpreted and discussed with support from the theory of imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff 2015) and the four-item taxonomy of affordances including visibility, editability, persistence, and association (Treem and Leonardi 2013). First, the federations’ social media affordances are investigated by introducing their views on why they use social media and what platforms they have chosen to be an active part of:

RQ1: What are the incentives for sport federations to use social media?

Second, the federations’ creation and affordance of their social media accounts are focused by analyzing the federations use of social media:

RQ2: In what way do sport federations shape their social media affordances through their strategic work with communication on social media?

Third, the interaction with the federations’ audiences is focused by investigating the federations view on—and interaction with—their users:

RQ3: How do sports federations perceive—and interact with—their social media audiences?
1.2. Theoretical Framework

James Gibson (1979) developed the term affordances, which has become a commonly used notion in communication technology and social media studies (Nagy and Neff 2015; Shaw 2017; Manzerolle and Daubs 2021). Traditionally, affordance describes what the environment offers the animal. In his book The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (1979), Gibson defines it as follows:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementary of the animal and the environment (Gibson 1979, p. 127).

In media and communication studies, the notion of affordances allows researchers to “talk about the imbrication of culture and technology” (Shaw 2017, p. 595; Nagy and Neff 2015). One can think of interactive media technologies in terms of imagined affordances, and an extension of the affordance theory can support communication theorists to focus on the construction, mediation, and materialization of power and social relationships (Shaw 2017; Nagy and Neff 2015). Imagined affordance helps to explain how people shape their media environments, perceive them, and have agency within them because of imagined affordances. Shaw (2017) emphasizes that “designs and environments like media representations do not tell us what to think or do, but they do shape what we think with” (Shaw 2017, p. 596). Ronzhyn et al. (2022) further raise that the main advantage of using the affordances perspective in social media research is that it underlines the role and agency of humans in the use of technology. This is done by looking into both the contextual and the individual aspects of technology use to investigate “how social media usage is shaped by the properties of actors and their context” (Ronzhyn et al. 2022, p. 14). The following definition of social media affordances is used to create a more coherent understanding of what affordance means in social media research:

“Social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms” (Ronzhyn et al. 2022, p. 14).

In this study, imagined affordances will be used to investigate in what way sports federations, by shaping their social media affordances, are mediatized in the way that they act and communicate with their audiences. This means that the focus in the analysis of the practices among the federations does not lie on a media-centric perspective of using mediatization to understand the sports federations’ role in society, but rather seeing mediatization as an internal process in the organizations’ quest to create bonds and relationships with their audiences. Further, according to the theory of imagined affordances, the focus of the analysis lies in what way the federations perceive or imagine their uses of social media, i.e., their social media practices, and their social media users, i.e., their audiences.

“The point is not solely what people think technology can do or what designers say technology can do, but what people imagine a tool is for. Imagination connotes perception, not just rationality, a distinction that is missing in how communication scholars currently use the term “affordance.” (Nagy and Neff 2015, p. 7).

According to Treem and Leonardi (2013), “defining social media by enumerating its affordances may allow for a nuanced understanding of when, why, and how social media occasion change in organizational practice” (p. 147). To conduct the analysis of the federations’ imagined uses and users (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015) of social media, the four-item taxonomy including visibility, editability, persistence, and association, developed by Treem and Leonardi (2013), is used. Visibility is tied to the amount of effort people must undertake to locate information and explains in what way social media afford users
the ability to make their behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections that were once invisible visible to others (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 150). Persistence explains how communication stays accessible to its audiences after the actor has finished her or his presentation, and the persistence of content on social media allows individuals to contribute to the technology “to develop and remain available over time” (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 156). Editability is a focus on the fact that individuals are able to spend time and effort to produce and develop a communicative act before it is presented to its audiences. “Editability is a function of two aspects of an interaction: communication formed in isolation from others, and asynchronicity” (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 159). Finally, associations are established connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation. There are two forms of associations in social media, where the first is created from one person to another individual (i.e., a social tie), and the other is created by an individual to a piece of information (for example, a wiki contribution or tagging of an article) (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 162).

1.3. Mediatization and Sports

According to Frandsen, mediatization is a process that is in operation at many levels and at various speeds, and it takes organizations in diverse directions (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). Mediatization as a concept and theory has proven to be popular in recent years, not only in terms of its overall visibility but also regarding the range of topics it has been attached to (Skey et al. 2018, p. 591). This has, according to Deacon and Stanyer (2014), resulted in the use of mediatization offering simplistic narratives of social change that tend to be overly media-centric. To keep the relevance of using the term, Livingstone and Lunt (2014) suggest that mediatization studies should be focusing on domains of society that have their own institutional logic or cultural order, their own entrenched governance regimes, rules and norms, resources and expertise (Livingstone and Lunt 2014, p. 706). The actor-centered approach with actors who have been influenced by various media over time supports mediatization studies to move away from the critiqued media-centrism, focusing on activities of groups and individuals rather than media and its presumed impact (Skey et al. 2018; Moores 2013). The current study is focusing on organizations (i.e., sport federations) that operate in an organizational environment (i.e., the organized sports sector) that indeed has its own logics, governance structures, rules, norms, as well as expertise and will focus on an actor-centered approach rather than a media-centric approach. This is mainly done by focusing on the sport federations’ practices, activities, and views on their own use of social media rather than the influence of media on these organizations. To move further away from media-centrism and the simplistic use of mediatization (cf. Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Skey et al. 2018) and to increase the understanding of the sports federations and their mediated communication with their audiences, the theory of affordances will be used as the main operating theoretical approach in this study. Mediatization and the previous studies on sports and mediatization are used to contextualize and discuss the findings in the present study.

1.4. The Swedish Sports Movement

The Swedish sports movement is governed by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC), an umbrella organization divided into 72 national sports federations (NSFs) and 19 regional sport federations (RSFs). Sweden is populated by 10.5 million people, and overall, the sports movement involves 3.3 million individual members of around 19,000 associations in the 72 NSFs (Riksidrottsförbundet 2021). The administrative structure of the SSC is voluntary and membership-based and receives an annual budget from the Swedish government. The budget is allocated to the various divisions and RSFs of SSC and further distributed to the NSFs, which ultimately divide the funding towards their member associations. Traditionally, the relationship between the Swedish Sports Movement and the Swedish government is defined by an “implicit contract” where the government defines the extent and the purpose of the funding, and the recipient (i.e., the sports movement)
determines the details of the distribution and administration of the funds. Autonomy and self-determination of the sports movement is an important cornerstone of this relationship (Norberg 2011; Fahlén and Stenling 2016). However, research shows that an increased demand on performance outputs and a wider social responsibility for organized sport have led to a system for follow-up and control of the government support to the sport movement colored by governing mechanisms associated with neoliberal ideologies. These trends are putting the implicit contract between the sports movement and the government to the test (Fahlén and Stenling 2016). Nagel et al. (2015) defines professionalization of sport organizations “as an organisational process of transformation leading towards organisational rationalisation, efficiency and business-like management” (Nagel et al. 2015, p. 407). Ever since the 1970s, professionalization and commercialization have been dominant trends in the world of sports, including the sports movement in Sweden. However, the processes of professionalization and commercialization of organized sports in Sweden have been outweighed by the unique balance between democratic fostering and competition fostering. According to Peterson (2008), the balance between democratic fostering (representing a mix of voluntary work, state support, and democratic work forms) and competition fostering (following the logics of sports) represents a cornerstone for the present and future success of the Scandinavian sports model. Further, in a report on future trends of the leadership and organization within the Swedish sports movement conducted by the SSC, the balance between the voluntary-based system with its unique values and professional and commercial trends is raised as crucial for the future development of Swedish sports (Welander 2020).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection

2.1.1. Sample Selection

In this study, three national sports federations were investigated: The Swedish Equestrian Federation, The Swedish Basketball Federation, and the Swedish Skateboard Association. These sports have been selected to give the study a nuanced picture of sports federations’ mediatization and use of social media. The underlying selection criteria are the social profile of the participants in the different sports, focusing on gender distribution, for how long the specific sport has been a member of the Swedish Sports Confederation, and the number of member associations, individual members, as well as the number of staff members working for the federation (Table 1).

Table 1. Profiles of the National Sport Federations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federation</th>
<th>Formed Year</th>
<th>Number of Member Associations</th>
<th>Number of Individual Members</th>
<th>Gender Distribution among Members</th>
<th>Number of Staff Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Equestrian Federation</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>168,599</td>
<td>92% female 8% male</td>
<td>41 (33 female 8 male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Basketball Federation</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>142,516</td>
<td>45% female 55% male</td>
<td>19 (6 female 13 male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Skateboard Association</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>29,796</td>
<td>22% female 78% male</td>
<td>4 (1 female 3 male)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Swedish Basketball Federation (SBF) was formed in 1952, and today, their office consists of 19 staff members. SBF’s communication efforts are based in a department called marketing, event, and communication. The persons interviewed in this study, Marc, and Dan (the interviewees names have been replaced with fictive names for the purpose of confidentiality), are both working in this department and have strategic and practical experience working with social media and communications. SBF uses several ICTs as platforms for their communication efforts (see Table 2). The Swedish Skateboard Association (SSA) was formed in January 2012, and since 2014, the office has grown
from one to four staff members, two full-time staff who are the two interviewees, Sam and Jessie, and two staff members working on specific projects. There is no specific communications department, all four staff members are at some level involved in social media engagements. The Swedish Equestrian Federation (SEF) was formed in 1912, and today, their office consists of around 40 staff members. The marketing and communication department consists of 10 persons, and the two interviewees, Lisa, and Sophie, focus on communication efforts through social media. Lisa mainly focuses on grassroots sports-related communication and educational material with riding clubs and riding schools as target groups, whereas Sophie works more with content related to sports and competitions.

2.1.2. Interviews

Semistructured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018) with two representatives from each federation, of which three were male and three were female, were conducted in April–May 2020. An interview guide including three sections guided the interviews. The first part included open introductory questions focusing on the interviewees’ background and role at the federation. The second part focused on the federations’ audiences and target groups, and the interviewees were asked to describe, rank, and elaborate on the federations’ target groups. Part number three was the most extensive part, focusing on the federations’ work with social media. Questions about the federations’ communication strategies and their work in relation to social media were posed. The interviews led by the author lasted between 50 and 90 min, with an average duration of 76.55 min. All interviews were conducted through Zoom and were recorded and transcribed.

2.1.3. Digital Ethnography

To further investigate the sports federations’ work with, and presence, on social media, netnographic observations (Berg 2015) of the three federations’ official social media platforms were conducted. The observations were conducted for two months: March 2021 and January 2022. Multiple social media platforms were observed (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) and the material was collected through field notes. The field-note diary includes a detailed description of the posts (text, video, image(s)), the number of likes and comments, and a caption of the comments.

2.2. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were thematically analyzed (Clarke and Braun 2018) and coded using the qualitative computer-assisted software NVivo. The following themes were identified in the analysis: Appropriation (sub-codes: Guidelines, Policy, Practical work, Strategy), Audiences (sub-codes: target groups, reception, and influencers/profiles), Content, Development (sub-codes: Success factors, Threats, Challenges, Development areas), and Information-Federation. Further, the material collected through the digital ethnography of the federations’ SNS was also coded and analyzed using NVivo. Finally, quotes representing the themes were added in the Results section. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006), adding quotations in the results may be a useful tool to assure that the research participants are given agency by including their voices. However, it is important to keep a thoughtful balance between quotes and the analytical text conducted by the researcher. In this study, it has been of importance to include the interviewees’ voices, as their views on strategic communication through SNS form one of the foundations of the data collected and are a cornerstone in the analysis.

The data collected through the digital ethnography were analyzed through four queries conducted using NVivo: the number of posts per SNS for all federations (Figure 1), the number of posts per federation and SNS (Table 3), and content produced by the federations (Table 4 and Figures 2–4).
2.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have influenced the approach of the study. Informed consent has been collected from the interviewees, who were thoroughly introduced to the research project before commencing the interviews. The interviewees were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time or choose not to respond to certain questions. For the purpose of confidentiality, sensitive and personal information is safely archived. The interviewees’ names have been replaced, and other indicators that could reveal their identity have been removed or altered. Regarding the digital ethnography, the official platforms of the three federations are used, and there has been an active choice not to include observations from, for example, closed groups formed by individuals on SNS. Further, representatives from the federations have, during the interviews, been informed that the federations’ official SNS will be observed and included in the study.

3. Results

3.1. The Federation’s Social Media Affordances

3.1.1. Aims of Using Social Network Sites

All three federations in this study are convinced that SNS are an important part of their communication efforts and that it is necessary to use SNS to reach out with their information. They do, however, have slightly different views on why they use SNS. Thus, it is likely that they shape their social media affordances in various ways. To uncover the federations’ social media affordances, the reasoning behind their use of the platforms is presented. The focus lies on investigating how the organizations shape their media environments (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015). For the Swedish Basketball Federation (SBF), the use of SNS is necessary to stay relevant for a younger audience but also to develop the brand Swedish basketball and to reach more fans. Throughout the interviews, organizations such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) are mentioned as inspirations for SBF’s work with communication through SNS. In the excerpts below, one of the interviewees from SBF, Marc, expresses the importance of staying on top of the developing social media landscape and the potential in reaching out to, specifically, a younger basketball audience through SNS:

Marc: If we look at one of the challenges that we face . . . is that we want to keep young players involved in basketball. We don’t want young people who play basketball to stop playing because other things get in the way. We cannot fully succeed in this unless we have a brand and communication channels that appeal to and interest the young audience. Because the probability of staying in the sport is much greater if they see that we stand for interesting content, an interesting brand, and interesting content on social media. There you can draw inspiration from many different sources. For example, the NBA in the US has done a fantastic job with that. They have been at the forefront of digital development all along and have worked very successfully in raising player profiles and engaging young fans in an extremely effective way (Interview with Marc, SBF).

The results show that SBF, through its visibility on SNS, aims to strengthen its brand to retain young players and engage with new audiences. For the Swedish Skateboard Association (SSA), it is also important to use SNS to increase its visibility. However, it seems even more important for them to, through SNS, afford an environment where they can create associations between themselves and their audiences. The representatives from SSA express that they use social media to create a sense of community and intimacy with their target groups. An example of this is that they have chosen to, instead of setting up an official Facebook page, create a group as the official channel on Facebook. They believe that a group allows their followers to communicate more freely, which creates a better feeling of togetherness, as it allows everyone to have a voice and space to express their opinions. In other words, they wish to afford an environment driven by associations between the organization and its audiences. Further, this shows that a platform such as Facebook
affords different possibilities for organizations and that it, in cases like this, indeed reflects the organizational aims and strategies that stand behind the shaping of the platform’s attributes.

Even if it is evident that social media is a very important part of the Swedish Equestrian Federation’s (SEF) communication department, there seems to be a paradox regarding the traditional aspects of the equestrian industry and the developing digital communication landscape. On the one hand, there are patterns showing reluctance, and sometimes even fear, towards communication through SNS, and on the other hand, SNS are raised as important forums for the equestrian community. In the excerpts below, Lisa elaborates on this paradox and raises the development potential regarding “thinking more social” as she puts it:

Lisa: I also think that we are a bit behind, we operate in a very old-fashioned way in general. So, when we make strategies for different projects and communication plans, we don’t always think social, but things are starting to happen. If you have a pile of money, you should put at least half of it to buy outreach if you want to reach out properly. Because it’s not possible to rely on organic outreach anymore. So that there is, of course, a development potential in that as well. To think more social in our plans and strategies.

Lovisa: Why do you think it’s so old-fashioned in your sport?

Lisa: Honestly, I think there are a lot of good people . . . but we are such a super analog industry. I don’t think it has anything to do with age either, there are also young people who become analog like that. There’s sort of a strength in it as well, but it lags a bit. You do what you’ve always done.

. . .

Maybe we’re a bit slower than others because we have a bit slower sport, I don’t really know, because we are very hands-on as well (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

The equestrian industry is expressed as quite analog and traditional, but at the same time, the interviewees see great potential in reaching out to the target groups of the federation by using social media. SNS are seen as powerful tools to build better relationships with their target groups, and one of the interviewees expresses that this has slightly transformed the image of the federation, from being seen as a very bureaucratic organization to being more accessible toward its members. In the excerpts above, Lisa also elaborates that it is necessary to have resources in terms of money to afford outreach through SNS and that it is impossible to gain organic outreach today.

3.1.2. The Federations’ Choice of Social Network Sites

To further analyze the social media affordances of the federations, it is necessary to look at their choice of SNS or perhaps, more importantly, the reasoning behind their choice of the use of different SNS. All three federations use multiple SNS; Facebook together with Instagram are seen as central platforms of their communication through social media. The number of followers on the federations’ different SNS is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of the federations’ SNS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federation</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>TikTok</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Equestrian Federation</td>
<td>66,000 followers</td>
<td>76,300 followers</td>
<td>3600 followers</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Basketball Federation</td>
<td>10,700 followers</td>
<td>17,500 followers</td>
<td>5160 followers</td>
<td>9600 followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Skateboard Association</td>
<td>3400 group members</td>
<td>3170 followers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of followers per federation and SNS, 20230320.
Figure 1 and Table 3 below present results from the digital ethnography and show the three federations’ activity on their different SNS during the time of the observations.

**Figure 1.** Number of posts by all three federations on the different SNS.

The results show that the federations were, at the time of the observations, publishing the most posts on Facebook (n = 136), closely followed by Instagram (n = 134), while Twitter (n = 21) and TikTok (n = 5) were more rarely used by the federations. To compare the use of SNS between the organizations, the number of posts per federation and SNS was collected, analyzed, and summarized. As shown in Table 3 below, SBF published the highest number of posts (n = 148), followed by SEF (n = 92) and SSA (n = 49). SBF and SEF published the most posts on Facebook, whereas SSA was more active on Instagram, and the only federation active on TikTok was SBF. These results show that it is not the federation with the most resources in terms of staff who are the most active on their SNS. However, the observations reveal that SBF often publishes multiple posts per day and platform just like SSA (on some occasions they both post up to six posts per day on Facebook or Instagram), whereas SEF seems more restrictive regarding multiple posts per day and platform. On some occasions, SEF published up to four posts per day on a platform but not more than that.

**Table 3.** Number of posts per SNS divided by federation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A: Basketball</th>
<th>B: Equestrian</th>
<th>C: Skateboard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Facebook</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Instagram</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: TikTok</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Twitter</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>148</strong></td>
<td><strong>92</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewees were also asked what platforms they are using and why they have chosen to be present on these SNS. As shown in the results from the digital ethnography above, the federations use multiple platforms, and SBF is the most active organization by measuring the number of active platforms and number of posts. Interestingly, the interviewees from SBF raise Instagram as their largest SNS with the most followers; however, they are not most active on this platform, they are posting more on Facebook in comparison to Instagram. Twitter is also used by SBF but has fewer followers than the other SNS, and, in the interviews, TikTok was raised as a potential new platform for the federation.
Later, the digital ethnography revealed that a TikTok account indeed was set up and active (see Table 3 above). Like the Basketball Federation, the Skateboard Federation mainly uses Facebook and Instagram together with their website as their main communication channels, and they also have an account on YouTube. They do not use Twitter or TikTok. The interviews show that the respondents from the Equestrian Federation, just like the respondents from the other two federations, see SNS as important recourses in their external communication efforts.

3.1.3. Background and Traditions

The results above show that all federations today see SNS as important recourses. However, one of the interviewees from the equestrian federation reveals that she had to struggle to get her colleagues and bosses to accept that the federation should be present on social media back in 2011. The Equestrian Federation has a history of battling with a rather suspicious attitude towards communication through SNS; this is also in line with the argument made previously regarding the traditional nature of this federation and the sport in general. However, the results also show that the will to be present and accessible to the members and followers often seems to win over the rather hesitant attitude toward new ways of communicating.

For the skateboard federation, communication through social media is used to guide new members or people who are curious about “how the sport works.” In the excerpts below, a respondent from the skateboard federation, Jessie, elaborates on how skateboarding is different from other sports in relation to traditions and path dependency:

Jessie: I think that a sport that has been part of the Swedish Sports Confederation for a long time has its pathway already set out. They’re probably like, it has always been like this, it’s not questioned. I think that for us, who attract people who are not used to the way things are in the organized sports movement or understand what it’s about, communication on social media is important (Interview with Jessie, SSA).

There are differences in the three federations’ approaches regarding their choice of SNS. On the one hand, SBF sees it as an important task to follow the developing social media landscape and open up new platforms continuously if they see that their target audience (i.e., young people who are (or potentially will be) interested in basketball) is present there. This approach is evident both from the results of the interviews and the digital ethnography. On the other hand, and in contrast to SBF, SEF and SSA are quite clear that they do not see the need to be an early adopter of new platforms. The interviewees from SSA stress the importance of knowing where the organizations’ target groups interact and mean that it is better to follow the target groups rather than set new trends regarding digital platforms. The interviewees from the Equestrian Federation are, just like the Skateboard Association, convinced that the organization does not need to be an early adopter when it comes to testing new social media platforms. In the excerpts below, one of the interviewees from SEF explains that she sees the potential in developing new platforms of communication but also stresses that it is very time-consuming to keep multiple accounts active:

Lisa: We sort of feel like we don’t want to be everywhere (on all different social media platforms, authors remark) and we don’t need to be the first ones present at a new platform. We still must be able to keep up with the work, so we haven’t been very keen on starting up all new platforms at the same time. There is a huge potential that we just don’t really have time for today (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Time and recourses are barriers for the Skateboard and Equestrian Federations to set up new SNS; interestingly, these two federations are the smallest, respectively, and the largest federation in terms of practitioners, members as well as staff members, which indicates that the size of the federation is not the only factor defining the number of platforms federations are active on. Just like the Basketball Federation, they see potential with new platforms, but they would rather prioritize their work with their existing SNS.
The results in this section show that the federations have both similar and different approaches to what their social media affordances are and need to be. These results are in line with results from Frandsen (2016) study on Danish sports federations’ level of mediatization in relation to social media use, showing that mediatization is a process that takes organizations in diverse directions (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). However, the results in this study show, in contrast to Frandsen (2016) as well as English’s (2021) study, that all three federations are operating their media in-house and do not outsource these tasks regardless of their size and resources.

3.2. The Federation’s Uses of Social Media

In this section, results in relation to the federation’s affordances of social media are discussed by analyzing their uses of social media. This is done by presenting their producer practices and strategies related to their use of SNS as well as an overview of the content produced by the federations.

3.2.1. Social Media Strategies

All three federations expressed that they were in the middle of producing new communication strategies or improving existing strategies. At the time of the interviews, SBF was in the final phases of putting a marketing strategy together. Although the marketing strategy was implemented recently, SBF has an existing communication plan describing the practical guidelines for the work with SNS. This plan describes which communication channels the federation uses, different categories of communication (such as decisions related to competitions, strategic decisions, crisis information, information about educational programs, etc.), and in what way they should use the different platforms of communication. Further, the communication plan covers the tone used and the different target groups in focus for the different platforms of communication.

All four staff members at the Skateboard Association are in some way involved in communications, and this is generally seen as a strength by the interviewees; it can, however, also be a challenge. In the excerpts below, Sam describes a situation that accentuated the need for more structured communication efforts among the four staff members.

Sam: We don’t want to overload our channels, we managed to do that...not last Friday but the Friday before that. Then it was just like, on our Facebook, I just, what happened now? There were like six posts on the same day, which meant that the most important thing that we needed to communicate that day was just lost and got fewer likes or lost integration, what is it called?

Lovisa: Outreach?

Sam: Yes, it just drowned because there was so much else that came up and then we had to have a meeting at the office, and just talk about, what happened now? I want us to post a lot of stuff, but you must have a bit of structure. So, check the page before you blurt things out. But it’s learning by doing, of course (Interview with Sam, SSA).

The interviewees at the skateboard federation express a clear need to structure their work with SNS. They have therefore created a communications plan that, at the time of the interviews, was almost finalized. This plan includes a description of the different SNS used by the organization as well as a SWOT analysis of their communication efforts. However, interviewees from SSA elaborate on the importance of not structuring things too much. The results reveal hesitance or a slight resistance from SSA to destroy the work that they are already doing by overstructuring things. Even if they know that they need to better structure their communication efforts, they seem afraid that this might negatively affect the things that they do well today.

SEF is the only federation that already had a communication plan, including strategies for their communication on SNS, up and running. They were at the time of the interviews in the process of updating and improving the communication strategy. The document
includes a social media strategy, working as guidance on the frequency of posts on different platforms, guidelines on at what time it makes sense to publish on different platforms, etc. The interviewees argue that it is indeed helpful to have this document as support, specifically when a crisis hits them. The interviewees also acknowledge the need for updating the document frequently, as the algorithms for the different SNS change continuously, which influences the effects of, for example, at what time during the day posts get the most outreach. Interestingly, it is only interviewees from SEF who refer to what SNS affords them, in terms of technical possibilities and obstacles. Further, the interviewees at SEF express that it is important for them to have a continuous dialogue regarding content for their platforms; they have daily calls regarding the production and publication of content for their SNS.

3.2.2. Content Produced by the Federations

To further investigate the federations’ uses of social media, data on the content produced by the federations were collected and analyzed. The digital ethnography revealed 10 categories of content most frequently posted by the federations on SNS. In Table 4 below, the categories are presented together with a short example of what type of content this category contains.

Table 4. Categories of content on the federations’ SNS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Support to associations</td>
<td>Posts containing information to associations and updates from associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Competition</td>
<td>Posts related to competitions, such as news and updates on results and information about rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Elite sports</td>
<td>Posts related to elite sports and elite athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Games and activities</td>
<td>Posts introducing online activities or games, such as quizzes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Influencers and profiles</td>
<td>Posts introducing individual influencers and profiles, such as athletes or profiles connected to the federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Knowledge exchange</td>
<td>Posts raising knowledge in relation to the federation or the sport in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Media</td>
<td>Posts forwarding content from other media channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: News and updates</td>
<td>Posts containing official information and/or news from the federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: Social initiatives and projects</td>
<td>Posts containing information on noncompetitive initiatives and projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Collaboration and sponsors</td>
<td>Posts containing information and updates from sponsors and partners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures 2–4 below present results on the frequency of the categorized content produced and published on the federations’ SNS, divided by federation. The SNS posts collected through the digital ethnography were analyzed and coded according to the categories; one post can contain numerous categories. Therefore, the figures below represent an overview of the most frequent categories observed.
Figure 2. Content of the Swedish Basketball Federation.

Figure 3. Content of the Swedish Equestrian Federation.
A comparison of the results presented above reveals that the Basketball and Equestrian federations publish a high number of posts on SNS relating to competition, elite sports, news and updates, and influencers and profiles, whereas the Skateboard Association focuses on social initiatives and project as well as support to associations.

3.2.3. Tone and Language

The equestrian federation is the only organization that expresses that they have a strict policy stating that they solely communicate from the official channels of the federation. It is stated in their strategy that the staff members, in their professional role, never should engage in discussions in external groups or forums on SNS. Another policy is that staff members never sign a social media post with their own name. This is to protect the staff members from being criticized or assaulted. In the excerpts below, Lisa raises that there have been incidents where staff members have been assaulted by people on social media:

Lisa: For example, we have a strategy around never answering with a name, for our employees, we get quite a lot of angry comments like that, it’s a bit unpleasant. There have been a few trolls throughout the years who have targeted individual employees. So, it’s probably mostly to avoid that kind of harassment and stuff, this is where we need our policies.

Lovisa: I’m a bit curious, why do you have this strategy, of never answering with your names?

Lisa: In general, Facebook has probably succeeded better, I don’t really know this, but I feel it that way because we notice a significant difference in how they clean, very rough words and such. Because people get very angry. It could, for example, be about changing a rule, or moving a competition, it can be things like that where people want to reach individuals and decision-makers (at the federation, authors remark). It can be harsh words too, now maybe it’s not so much towards individuals right now, at the moment it’s more that we are stupid in general. Haha.

Lovisa: Sometimes if it’s a spokesperson or our sports director for example, then, of course, it can happen that they go after individual employees, and we’d rather not have that of course. We are happy to respond to it collectively and sometimes
the power of a chairman’s words or something is needed, but we do not want to put individuals in vulnerable positions (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Evidently, the tone can be quite harsh on the Equestrian Federations’ SNS; therefore, the organization has implemented strategies to protect individual employees from being put in positions where they might be criticized or even harassed. This challenge could create a barrier between the organization and its followers. However, the interviewees attest that SNS are important to building relationships and creating a bond between the federation and its audiences. In fact, one of the interviewees raises the tonality in their communication on SNS as a success factor, and the explosive force in the equestrian community seems to be a strength as much as a threat.

Tonality is also something that is important in the Skateboard Federations’ work with SNS, which aims to develop a tone, language, and image that feel natural and communicates who they are and what they do. SSA see a need to translate the language and tone from a bureaucratic tone in the messages from, for example, the Sports Confederation to a language that speaks more directly to their member and audiences:

Sam: . . . it’s a very important role that we need to translate the sports confederation’s words into words that are relevant and can be received by the associations and practitioners. In some cases, we may not always use the term sport, it is important that we replace it with skateboarding. There must not be too many complicated bureaucratic words going on. The text needs to be . . . for example, when we communicate with municipalities we use a certain language, it is important that we can speak their language too but when we talk to the associations, we say the same thing but translated . . . it’s not like they don’t understand anything of what we say. It’s not like that, it’s more about the fact that certain words may have a negative connotation for some and then we can just replace that word with something that is more relevant within the scene (the skateboard scene, authors remark). Then it is received better (Interview with Sam, SSA).

Regarding tone and language, terms such as brand, consumers, fans, storylines, and coolness factor are used repeatedly by the interviewees from the Basketball Federation. The language that the two representatives from SBF uses expresses a more commercial tone than the other two federations.

3.3. The Federation’s Perceptions and Interactions with Their Users

To investigate in what way sport federation’s perceive and interact with their social media audiences, the interviewees were asked who they see as their target groups and in what way they communicate with these groups through their SNS.

3.3.1. Target Groups

The Basketball Federation’s primary target groups are people who already are active in basketball such as practitioners, participants, leaders, and coaches; in sum, persons who need to be reached by practical information linked to the operations of the federation. External target groups such as basketball consumers, fans, and the general public with an interest in basketball are expressed as the secondary target groups. It is, however, expressed by Marc that the federation works on adapting the content on SNS to appeal to this secondary target group to a greater extent:

Marc: . . . Regarding social media, it is a combination of these target groups, but we try to adapt the content on social media to appeal to the external target group to a greater extent. So that we reach those who are not yet very into basketball. So, I would probably sum it up that the strategy is to start from those of us who already are important target groups in basketball in Sweden, but we also try to attract target groups outside who can be seen as future basketball consumers (Interview with Marc, SBF).
Like the Basketball Federation, the Equestrian Federation also aims to reach out to a broad target group by communicating through SNS even if they prioritize their members and practitioners. However, in contrast to SBF, they express that they do not make any difference between members and nonmembers in their communication efforts:

Lisa: … when we think of social media channels, we don’t make such a big difference between members and non-members. We want more members, and we want more people to be interested in our federation, and the organized equestrian sport. So, we think we should be as generous and open as we can.

Lovisa: Okay, I have a follow-up question, could you please rank these target groups?

Lisa: Oh yes.. the associations. It’s the associations, those who are elected representatives in the associations, and those who are involved and run them, they are of course most important to us. But it really is very different over time, what stakeholders in society are most relevant. But traditionally we work via the associations, and then their members, first the organization and then the individual member. Then we have, media, media is quite prioritized (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Equestrian sport is the second largest youth sport in Sweden and SEF is, according to the interviewees, determined to reach out to a broad target group through ICTs and sees a big potential in this. However, the interviews reveal that a lack of time and recourses stands in the way of being present on platforms where they know that the younger target groups interact.

Just like the other two federations, SSA prioritize their already-existing target groups and emphasize that it is important to acknowledge members and practitioners. However, they admit that they have gotten comments from members of their main target group, that they feel a bit neglected as the federation has focused a lot on communicating pictures and videos portraying a more diverse group of skateboarders:

Sam: We work very much on gender equality and inclusion in the skateboard federation. However, the typical skateboard practitioner is white, young- or middle-aged men, at least in Sweden, so we work a lot on bringing awareness that we welcome everyone and that we want to have fifty-fifty girls and boys. We want to promote a diversity of skateboarders because it’s still a very “white sport”, we know that . . . we’re at least aware of it. Something that is very interesting is that we’ve gotten some input from a few of the “middle-aged white men” that they don’t really feel included as we mainly focus on female- and LGBTQ practitioners in our communication for example in our social media channels (Interview with Sam, SSA).

As expressed in the excerpts above, members of a certain group of skateboard practitioners have raised that they do not always feel included in the image that SSA communicates through their SNS.

3.3.2. Opportunities with SNS

To further analyze in what way the federations are working with SNS and how they shape their social media affordances, the interviewees were asked to elaborate on their thoughts on their future work with SNS and to identify opportunities related to communication through social media. In this quote, Marc elaborates on the role of SNS in the future and SBF’s ambition related to communication through SNS:

Marc: Basketball In the future as I see it … If our ambition is to build basketball partly through connecting sports to fashion, music, and all that … if we want to succeed in that then social media will be crucial to get where we want to go. We want basketball to stand for more than just the sporting aspect and more seen as a cool and societal phenomenon … a force. We will be able to do that
much better by using social media . . . So that’s where we see a lot of potential. It’s connected to the fact that we see our sport as a brand that includes more than just the games and the players. It’s a brand connected to what they do off the arena and connected to general things. Basketball promotes integration, equality, and inclusion. Tearing down walls in society is what we stand for. This can be communicated in a completely different way through social media than we would otherwise would’ve been able to and that is fantastic (Interview with Marc, SBF).

Again, the basketball federation sees social media engagements as a great opportunity to develop and ultimately expand the brand Swedish Basketball with more attributes than “just” the sport itself. They see social media as a great resource to make basketball into an exciting and cool societal phenomenon. This will be done by connecting the sport with fashion and music and to show that the brand Swedish Basketball is so much more than only what happens in the arena or what the players do. Further, the interviewees highlight the strength of basketball as an inclusive and equal sport that can tear down walls in society and that social media is a great resource to communicate these strengths.

For the Skateboard Association, learning by doing is a term that is used several times to express the need to develop their communication efforts without overstructuring things. Meeting their audiences at their level without being “too populistic”, as Jessie expresses it in one of the interviews, is also important for the federation. The democratic aspect of allowing people to interact at the same level is an important aspect of social media. Again, the interviewees from SSA express the potential in using social media as a tool to interact at the same level as their audience and the democratic aspects of being able to say what you think and spread information. In the excerpts above, Sam also raises the benefits for organizations to host digital meetings such as the general assembly to allow more people to join and have a say. Throughout the interviews, SSA show that they are imagining the affordances of their SNS to be tools to create spaces where they can create a more equal and democratic space for them to interact with their audiences.

For SEF, accessibility is once again raised as being a great opportunity with strategic communication through social media. SNS are raised as great platforms to reach out with important yet accessible information. Another aspect raised as a success factor in the federation’s work with SNS is the love for the horse. The interviewees mean that, in comparison to other federations, SEF can use the common love for horses to build bonds with their users through SNS.

The results in this section show that the three federations have quite a similar view on who their target groups are, but the results show that they have different strategies on how to approach these groups. SBF is working to adjust their communication towards potential new basketball consumers, SEF does not make any difference between members and non-members, and SSA prioritizes minority groups.

### 4. Concluding Discussion

With the background that communication through social media is a major concern among national sports federations, the use and effects of digital media vary widely across these types of organizations (Frandsen 2016), together with knowledge that the pressure to adapt to the media logic by communicating with their audiences through social media is increasing for sports organizations that historically have been marginalized from traditional media (Nölleke and Birkner 2019). I argue that increased in-depth knowledge on how sport federations shape their social media affordances to build relationships with their audiences will develop the understanding and ongoing discussion on the effects of social media in organized sports. The aim of the current study was therefore to investigate in what way national sports federations shape their social media affordances to interact with their audiences through social media to further develop the understanding on organizational mediatization among national sport federations.
With regard to the first research question, *What are the incentives for sport federations to use social media?* previous research shows that there has been an attitude change among Danish sports federations concerning the needs of daily communication efforts, regardless of the sport. Previously, only the more professionalized federations such as the football federation have had a communication manager, whereas the smaller and less-professionalized federations relied on traditional media to spread information and news about their activities. Today, communication is regarded as highly relevant and necessary for all Danish sport federations (Frandsen 2016). However, the need and pressure on smaller federations to scale up their communication efforts is connected with the growing field of media landscape, is demanding, and may create a “digital-divide” among organizations (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Frandsen 2016). It is highly interesting to compare Swedish sports federations with Danish as the Scandinavian sports model, with its roots embedded in amateur ideology and ideals on democratic fostering (Peterson 2008) having a similar and unique history and approach. Similarly, to the federations in Frandsen (2016) study, the federations in the present study all are attesting to the importance of using social media to communicate with their audiences, and they are all prioritizing an increased structure of their work with SNS. However, instead of outsourcing their communication efforts (cf. Frandsen 2016), they see social media communications as an important in-house task. This is in line with previous research showing that sport organizations are mediatized in their way of using SNS to communicate to different audiences instead of relying on journalists (cf. Frandsen 2016; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; English 2022).

The general aim of the federation’s communication through social media is to reach out to and build relationships with their existing members and practitioners. There are, however, secondary aims revealed in the results showing differences between the three federations studied in this article. For the Equestrian Federation, it is highly important to, through their communication efforts on SNS, reflect a stable and trustworthy base offering information and updates that can benefit their followers in their equestrian interests. The Skateboard Association wishes to accentuate the spontaneous and democratic aspects and nature of the sport through their SNS communication, whereas the Basketball Federation wishes to utilize their strategic communication through SNS to strengthen the brand Swedish Basketball.

These results show that background, traditions, and recourses play a certain role when the federations shape social media affordances. Thus, it is of importance to create an understanding of sport federations’ background and traditions to further understand their mediatization. The Equestrian Federation and the Basketball Federation have more resources to allocate for communication and social media engagements as they are larger organizations. In other words, the strategic communications in these organizations are professionalized to a higher degree than in the Skateboard Association. Even so, the largest federation in terms of members, practitioners, and staff, namely, the Equestrian Federation, sees recourses as the largest barrier standing in their way to develop their social media engagements by, for example, opening accounts on new platforms such as TikTok. The interviewees stress that it is more important for the Equestrian Federation to be a reliable source of information and knowledge on their existing platforms than using recourses to develop new SNS. On the one hand, they stress that they do not have enough recourses to develop new social media accounts and platforms even if they wish to do so. On the other hand, they mean that it is a strategic decision to use existing resources to operate existing platforms and assure their quality. These results can be explained by the traditional nature of equestrianism. Stable cultures are, to some extent, defined by a military heritage and institutionalized governance structures leading to slow development pathways (Thorell and Hedenborg 2015).

The Skateboard Federation, which is the smallest organization, sees structure as the most important development area in relation to their work with communication. However, it is important for this organization to not fall into patterns and pathways set out by more traditional sports, and they aim to build relationships with their audiences defined
by community and democracy. These results can be explained by the background of skateboarding as a self-organized lifestyle sport defined by urban subcultures. Previous research shows that skateboarders use SNS to learn, perform, and discuss their authentic identities resulting in the maintenance of boundaries for authentic behavior (Buckingham 2009; Woermann 2012; Dupont 2020). For the Basketball Federation, the most important area in regards to developing the communication through social media is to strengthen the brand Swedish Basketball and to show that it is more than “a sport”. These results can be related to the commercial focus of the federations’ strategies and practices, which further can be explained by the mediatized and commercial nature of the federations’ role model, NBA (cf. Secular 2019).

The study on Danish sports federations shows that communication still is treated as a low priority support function in terms of structure and allocated resources in many federations. In regards to organizational change and level of mediatization, Frandsen (2016) argues that a clear and implementable communication strategy is a relevant marker for where in this process an organization stands. Among the Danish sports federations, a vast majority of the larger organizations were, at the time of the study, already in possession of a communication strategy, whereas only 24% of the smaller federations felt the need or had resources to create and implement this type of strategy (Frandsen 2016). Interestingly, all three federations in this study attested to being in the process of developing a new (Skateboard and Basketball), or updating the existing, communication strategy. Thus, regardless of the size and professionalization of the federation, strategic communication seems to have developed in comparison to the study conducted by Frandsen in 2016. To further investigate sport federations, I argue that it is necessary to further investigate what the work on SNS means for the federations. Therefore, the federations’ creation and affordance of their social media accounts are focused by analyzing the federations’ use of social media. By investigating the federations’ communication strategies, the content produced by the federations and the tone and language used on SNS by the federations, the second research question: In what way do sport federations shape their social media affordances through their strategic work with communication on social media? is investigated.

Results reveal that the Equestrian Federation has afforded an environment on SNS defined by visibility. Since the very beginning, they have been cautious towards letting their audience co-create content with them through SNS, meaning that their affordances are shaped in a way that do not fully accommodate their audience to be involved, which ultimately has led to a relationship between audience (i.e., followers) and federation partly defined by suspicion. The Skateboard Association, which has afforded an environment on SNS defined by association, is fully focused on co-creating content and democratic ways to interact, but with whom? They have a clear imagination of their users and afford an environment thereafter. However, this imagination does not seem to match their actual users and the question is if they can reach their goals and aims if they do not include their actual users to an increased extent. Finally, The Basketball Federation, which has afforded an environment on SNS defined by visibility, has a clear goal to empower their brand through SNS and to engage more people in basketball. Their imagined users (i.e., fans) are young people interested in what is going on both inside and outside of the basketball arena and ready to consume fashion, music, and other trends related to basketball.

To further investigate in what way sport federations shape their social media affordances, the interactions between the federations and their audiences were focused through the third and final research question: How do sports federations perceive- and interact with their social media audiences? The results reveal that, for the Skateboard Association, it is highly important to build a sense of community and intimacy where everyone who is interested in skateboarding can express themselves freely through the federation’s SNS. The Skateboard Association imagines their users as fellows, who co-create content together with the federation. It is however questionable who they really are communicating to. The interviewees attest that they have gotten comments from members of their main target group who do not always feel included in the federation’s communication efforts. The results reveal that
the Skateboard Association is prioritizing a more diverse group of skateboarders in their communication efforts.

In contrast to the Skateboard Association, the Equestrian Federation chooses to be very formal in their communication through their channels. They see their audiences as followers who benefit from consuming the messages and knowledge presented by the federation through social media. This seems to be grounded in a suspiciousness from what happens when individuals do not agree with the content communicated by the federation. Thus, even if the Equestrian Federation wishes to be the stable and trustful source of information and knowledge, their relationship with their users does not always seem to be built on mutual trust. Finally, the Basketball Federation imagines their audiences as consumers and fans to a greater extent than the other federations. With NBA and FIBA as role models, their goal is to recruit more basketball fans by reaching out with highlights and focusing on the coolness factor surrounding basketball and the culture around the sport. It is however questionable whether the Basketball Federation engages their existing audiences such as members and practitioners with this approach.

To conclude, the analysis in this study has focused on in what way sport federations shape social media affordances (cf. Ronzhyn et al. 2022; Shaw 2017; Treem and Leonardi 2013), as well as in what way they imagine social media uses and users (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015). The present study shows that the federations’ imagination of who their users are, what they would like to see, and how these users act and react defines their affordances. Further, the results reveal that the three federations have differing approaches to in what way they imagine their users as well as what their incentives are for using social media.

To create an understanding of in what way the mediatization of sports federations mold long-term changes for these organizations (cf. Lundby 2014; Frandsen 2016), an increased understanding on the federations’ (imagined) social media affordances in relation to their (imagined) users is crucial. In other words, the level of mediatization in the different organizations is not the focal point. It is the organizations’ choices and practices to shape their mediated environments to build relationships with their audiences that form the central part of this study. Thus, it is of importance to look beyond the overarching theory of mediatization to understand how sport organizations, such as national sport federations, can develop through social media engagements. To learn how ongoing mediations mold long-term changes for sport federations, it is of importance to look beyond mediatization and learn more about their current structure and operations, their history, and traditions, as well as their view of their users.

5. Research Limitation and Future Research Directions

A limitation with the present study is that a limited number of sports federations has been investigated. For future research projects on sports federations’ strategical communications through SNS, it would be interesting to include a higher number of organizations. Further, it would be interesting to expand the comparison between sport federations in different countries and contexts. It could also be argued that another limitation with the present study is that the analysis relies to a high extent on the actors’ own views of their strategical work with SNS. Although strengthened by the data collected through digital ethnography, the interviewees’ voices have a clear focus and heavy weight in this article. However, given the interviewees voices, a high level of space and agency is a conscious and important decision to fulfill the aim of this study and at the same time keeping a conscious ethical approach.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.
Acknowledgments: Thank you to my supervisors, Susanna Hedenborg, Tobias Olsson, and Aage Radmann who supported me in the process and read and commented on previous versions of the article. I would also like to thank the reviewers for their comments and suggestions which improved the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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